SWP 6/96 30 YEARS ON - WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT CAREERS?

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Abstract.

In everyday conversation, the term 'career' is generally understood to refer to the sequence of work-related experiences an individual has over the course of their working lifetime. For many people, a 'career' is distinct from a 'job', since it also conjures up images of steady, even logical, progression up organisational hierarchies. It is not simply about what one does for a living, but about what an individual has done, does now, and might do in the future; the notion of career therefore embraces the dimension of time. In the light of widespread organisational restructuring and economic uncertainty since the late eighties, many of the taken for granted assumptions which have underpinned traditional notions of career, and in particular the organisational career, no longer seem valid. Both individuals and organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to conceptualise the idea of a logical (long term) sequence of work-related experiences; there is no longer a clear and mutual understanding of what the career means to both individuals and organisations. This paper argues that both individuals and organisations can meaningfully redefine the notion of career by reconsidering its broader theoretical underpinnings.

Introduction.

In both the academic literature and practitioner press, much has been written about the death of the career and the emergence of a new deal in employment. This new deal, which no longer assumes a guaranteed career for life, has emerged in the light of organisational restructuring and, in particular, with the emergence of flatter organisations [Herriot & Pemberton, 1995].

Pervasive definitions of organisational or managerial careers encompass notions of hierarchical progression; that is, a sequence of work positions of increasing responsibility and seniority over time [Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989]. However, the flattening of organisational hierarchies has reduced or eliminated entire levels of management and, as such, career paths have become increasingly blurred [Inkson & Coe, 1993; Nicholson & West, 1991].

A high profile example of such change is exposed through the examination of graduate career management. The traditional rationale for employing graduates has been to provide a pool of high potential talent from which organisations may select their senior management of the future [Herriot, 1992]. Thus, graduate recruitment has traditionally been linked to managerial succession strategy, with graduates being viewed as *feedstock* for senior management [Tyson, 1995].

However, as planning horizons become shorter, and the future needs of organisations become less clear, organisations are finding it difficult to articulate a 'new' definition of career. In many cases, senior managers are stating that they no longer offer careers but rather *opportunities for development*, and that the responsibility for career development now rests with the individual [Herriot & Pemberton, 1995; Hirsh, Jackson & Jackson, 1995; Viney, Adamson & Doherty, 1995].

In this paper, we argue that there is a need to re-examine the theoretical assumptions which underpin the notion of career. In so doing, we prepare the ground for a redefinition of a concept whose time is far from over. In short, the pervasive definitions of career in the last thirty years are no longer tenable. Environmental turbulence and organisational change now require a broader definition of the concept, one which facilitates both what organisations want and can deliver, and which recognises the growing importance of individual career and self management.

The Meaning of Career in Everyday Usage

When people talk in everyday language of having a career, it is generally assumed that they are referring to their *work* career; that is, some reference to what they do for a living, who they work for, or what they have written on their curriculum vitae. Thus, simple definitions of 'career' might include: "...*the sequence of work-related positions occupied throughout a person's life.*" [London & Stumpf, 1982:4] or "...*the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time*." [Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989:8].

By definition, 'career' (deriving from the French, *carriere*, meaning road or course), implies a route which one is following, a route which has both direction and purpose. Thus, a key issue in the definition of career is the recognition of what Hughes (1937) called the *moving perspective of time*. Without some ordering of work experiences over time, and without some logic to the linkages between successive positions occupied over time, the career journey ceases to have meaning.

In the context of organisational careers, therefore, the career concept implies a relationship between employer and employee over time. It conjures up images of planned development, often of a hierarchical nature, and it suggests a logical sequence of work events and experiences. Thus, a career is not simply a job; it is something which embraces notions of development and logical progression.

But this is not the whole story. The concept of career is much broader than the exclusively work-related definitions of career which have dominated management thinking and practice in the last thirty years. From an economic perspective, for example, the career may be viewed as the vehicle through which *human capital* is accrued through a lifetime of education and experience [Becker, 1975]. Alternatively, from a political science perspective, the career may be seen as the sequence of endeavours to maximise self interest, through successive attempts to gain power, status or influence [Kaufman, 1960].

However, in order to understand the most pervasive conceptions of career, we need to re-examine the contributions of sociologists and psychologists to the development of career theory. There is also a need to distinguish between *the* career concept as conceived by the Chicago School of Sociology and contemporary notions of a work career, (the latter being a subset of the former).

The Meaning of Career to Organisations and Individuals.

From the organisational perspective, both conceptually and practically, the notion of career has many benefits. At its simplest, the career concept is useful for planning purposes, particularly in the context of management succession planning, and especially where the culture or philosophy of the organisation is to grow its managerial talent from within.

By creating a career structure, organisations are able to move their most valuable people through a series of planned positions in order that they may learn the ropes, learn what the organisation is about and, in principle, develop both the knowledge and skills either to occupy general management positions or, in the case of professionals, to enhance status.

Thus, the notion of career, construed as a *logical* sequence of work positions, allows organisations to manage a group of high potential individuals (e.g. a cadre of graduates) to enable them to fill current jobs, move through managerial levels, and to meet future organisational needs [Herriot, 1992]. It is thus a pervasive, and explicit mechanism for the effective management of human resources.

However, the notion of career also allows organisations to negotiate employment contracts at the subjective / implicit level. The psychological contract embodies the implicit expectations of both the organisation and the individual, and is central to this process. The psychological contract is a powerful device for developing a sense of loyalty: it hooks people in to an organisation. This is particularly the case where employee benefits (e.g. housing loans, stock options etc.) generate the need for a long term relationship.

To individuals, the career may have many meanings. For some, it may be the vehicle through which basic economic needs are satisfied. For others, it may provide a sense of self identity, social status or social worth. In other cases, the career may symbolically represent an individual's *Life Dream* [Levinson *et al*, 1978], offering structure, direction, meaning and purpose to their daily activities.

Thus, whilst we may conceive of work as primarily a social activity, a career implies much more than exclusively an exchange of labour for financial return.

Back to the Roots of Career Theory.

Beginning in the 1920's, the Chicago School of Sociology studied the *life histories* of the local community. They were interested in social ecology, demography, urbanisation, and social deviance, and their goal was to understand how people construed their lives [Barley, 1989]. When the Chicago sociologists used the term career, they were therefore referring to an heuristic concept, one which is applicable to a wider range of situations than is typical of current usage.

In 1931, Clifford Shaw wrote a seminal paper entitled *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career*. The basic thesis of Shaw's work was that the unfolding of an individual's life was bound to the contingencies of his social situation. In other words, the pattern of the delinquent's life was determined by a series of relationships with significant others, which helped to determine his sense of self. Shaw concluded that the delinquents' careers developed in a series of typical stages, and such conclusions were also reached by other writers who talked of career periods, phases or cycles, applying this notion of career to the lives of myriad social actors; e.g. doctors, dancers, and marijuana users. [Becker, 1953; Cressey, 1932; Hall, 1948].

The Chicago sociologists therefore identified three important components - the situational, the relational and the chronological - which are as relevant to contemporary conceptions of work career as they are to the career concept generally.

To talk of careers within this broader framework, is therefore to talk of the sequencing of an individual's life roles and experiences, in a specified social environment, over time.

The Last Thirty Years - Developments in Career Theory.

In the last thirty years, different disciplines have applied different definitions to the career concept. Sociologists, for example, have viewed the career as the unfolding of social roles, emphasising individuals' contributions to the maintenance of social order [Van Maanen & Barley, 1984]. Alternatively, they have talked of the career as social mobility, seeing the series of positions held over time, represented by, for example, a person's title, as indicators of social position [Blau & Duncan, 1967; Featherman & Hauser, 1978].

By contrast, psychologists have tended to view the career in one of three ways. First, the career as vocation, focusing on personality-occupation matching, in ways which are mutually beneficial to the individual and the organisation [Holland, 1985]. Second, as a vehicle for self-realisation and individual growth [Shepard, 1984]. Third, the career has been conceived of as a component of the individual life structure [Levinson, 1984].

For the most part, prior to the mid 1970's, psychologists and sociologists were addressing the notion of career from traditional disciplinary perspectives, trying to predict the suitability of the individual to certain work roles, and to explain the dynamic social exchange processes defined by individual-organisation interaction.

However, in the late seventies, there began a period of concerted effort toward the development of career theory as a discipline in its' own right, with the emergence of the *career management perspective* and of practitioner-oriented inquiry [Hall, 1976; Kotter, Faux & McArthur, 1978; Schein, 1978; Van Maanen, 1977].

During the eighties, the focus was on organisational practices and human resource systems [Brown & Brooks, 1984; Dalton & Thompson, 1986; Gutteridge, 1986; Sonnenfeld, 1984], as well as on a re-consideration of the processes of individual-organisation interaction, negotiation and psychological contracting [Joyce *et al*, 1982; Rousseau, 1989].

Since the mid-eighties, though, career writers have expanded their interest far beyond the traditional perspectives of psychology and sociology, and have adopted a multi-disciplinary orientation. Thus, the major contributions to career theory in the last ten years have sought to reflect;

> "...the relationships between people and the providers of official position, namely institutions and organisations, and how these relationships fluctuate over time. Seen in this way, the study of careers [has become] the study of both individual and organisational change...as well as of societal change." [Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989:8]

Writers have thus begun to pay more attention to the careers of women [Astin, 1984a,b; Bardwick, 1980; Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1980, 1982]; to work-family conflicts, [Amatea, *et al* 1986; Higgins & Duxbury, 1992a,b; Kinnier *et al*, 1991]; and to the unique challenges faced by the dual career couple [Bailyn, 1984; Burke & McKeen, 1993] .

Attention has also focused on the management of career transitions, [Howard & Bray, 1988; Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson & West, 1988]; the consequences of organisational re-structuring and alienation [Janssen *et al*, 1994]; and the measurement of career commitment [Blau, 1988; Colarelliu & Bishop, 1990; Morrow & McElroy, 1987].

Additionally, given increasing change and uncertainty in the business environment since the early eighties, the careers literature has also focused on the continued relevance of the career concept itself, and in particular the appropriateness of bureaucratic notions of the hierarchical managerial work career. [Herriot, 1992; Kanter, 1984; 1989a,b].

Core Concepts in the Idea of Career.

Despite these differences over time, however, there are commonly-identifiable themes which the majority of definitions of career embrace: (1) the individual, and the central importance of the psychological constructs of self concept and self esteem; (2) the organisation as a social institution; (3) the differing needs of the individual and the organisation; (4) psychological and sociological processes of person-organisation interaction; (5) the influence of the external environment, including socio-economic and political 'reality', and the impress of culture, history and prevailing social values; and (6) the perspective of time.

Of these core concepts, the work of Shaw (1931), Hughes (1937) and others at the Chicago School has highlighted the importance of the situational context of the career (the social environment); the relational dimensions of career (represented by an individual's interactions with significant others in the workplace); and the pre-eminent importance of chronology (the *moving* perspective of time). In addition, the works of Argyris (1964), Schein (1978) and Rousseau (1989), and more recently Herriot (1992) have emphasised the differing needs of the organisation and the individual, and the need to match these in order to generate mutual benefit: i.e. a contribution to business goals, the meeting of organisations' managerial needs, and the optimising of individual career progression.

Many of these concepts remain central to contemporary definitions of career, either explicitly or implicitly. But what has changed most dramatically over the last thirty years has been the relative emphasis which has been placed on one or other key component of the career concept.

In both management theory and practice, we have witnessed a paradigm shift. We have moved into the Post-Modern era, an era in which we are behoven to accommodate broader theoretical concepts, a greater degree of ambiguity in management practice, and pervasive uncertainty.

Key Shifts in Thought and Practice.

Traditionally, the organisational response to uncertainty has been rigidity. That is, organisations created rigid career structures whose processes were formal, bureaucratic and transparent, and the goal was to create predictability. In the current context, however, these responses are inappropriate.

Now, there is a need for flexibility, less tangible structures and more versatility to enable the conditions for fluidity in response. There is still a need to maintain many of the structures and processes of the old systems, but they are now intended to serve different purposes; career opportunity structures must now be more flexible and adaptable in order to embrace *both* rigidity *and* fluidity. It is in this context that management theorists and practitioners should now reflect upon the lessons of the last thirty years, and seek to redefine (or reaffirm) what is meant by the notion of career.

Until relatively recently, organisational careers were clearly demarcated. Career paths were explicitly marked out by the organisational hierarchy and by career ladders; there were obvious *routes to the top* [Nicholson & West, 1991]. Thus, we could conceive of a structure of opportunities [Sonnenfeld, 1984] which were made accessible to employees on the basis of ability, but more commonly in terms of age or tenure [Lawrence, 1988; 1990]. Career progression was therefore, fundamentally, a function of time, mediated by the rigidly structured opportunities at hand and the age-graded assumptions of organisational career timetables. Career progression was defined in terms of increases in individuals' skills, knowledge, abilities and responsibilities as they moved *up* the organisational hierarchy.

However, given economic and competitive pressures in recent years, organisations have continuously sought to make themselves leaner and fitter. The most obvious consequence of this has been de-layering. In terms of career philosophy, it now seems that many organisations have begun to articulate the view that there are no longer careers for life.

Previous research has indicated that many organisations are no longer even talking about careers and in a number of cases have gone so far as to remove the term 'career' from their graduate recruitment literature. Instead of offering 'world class careers' they now offer 'a world class start to a career'. Many organisations are now talking not of career opportunities (i.e. opportunities for advancement and/or progression) but of opportunities to improve *marketability* or *employability* [Viney, Adamson & Doherty, 1995].

This is a significant shift which illustrates three fundamental changes in organisations' career philosophy: (1) The employer-employee relationship is not now conceived as long term. Thus, the future-time orientation of careers now seems less appropriate; (2) Whilst career progression may indeed still mean moving between positions over time, it no longer necessarily means hierarchical movement - career progression has taken on an entirely different meaning; and (3) From both the organisational and individual perspectives it is no longer so apparent how a logical, ordered and sequential career may actually evolve.

Thus, the meaning and purpose of career is changing. In talking not of careers for life but opportunities to improve marketability or employability, organisations are in one move articulating a concept of career which orients individuals to both the internal *and* external opportunities for career development and progression. They are emphasising the shorter term nature of the employer-employee relationship, and they are offering lateral career development in place of hierarchical career progression.

It may therefore seem that the notion of succession planning rings hollow [Hirsh, Jackson & Jackson, 1995]. In the light of economic and competitive uncertainties, the notion of planning for the future has taken on a very different set of meanings and assumptions. Given competitive uncertainty, organisational instability and individual career insecurity, planning horizons have fundamentally shifted. Both organisations and individuals retain the idea of trying to control, plan and direct development, but the task has become increasingly complex.

New Directions - A Question of Emphasis ?

This *new organisational reality* [Herriot, 1992] has brought about a tangible shift in both the policy and practice of managerial career development. It follows that we are witnessing the re-negotiation of psychological contracts between organisations and their managerial populations. This shift in the terms of the employment deal is particularly apparent in the context of graduate careers.

It seems that organisations are faced with a dilemma. If they are no longer able to offer privileged routes to the top for the favoured few, then how will they retain the cadre of high potential staff they need to fill the senior management positions of the future ? It seems that one key task for organisations is to redefine what they mean by the notion of career, and thus to articulate its constituent elements as part of the message of the new deal. So what might this message be ?

As noted, research has suggested that employers are now talking about opportunities for increasing marketability or employability [Viney, Adamson & Doherty, 1995]. It seems that, in some cases, organisations are recognising that they can no longer offer the conditions under which a long term career may be delivered. Instead, they appear to be suggesting that they *are* able to offer the conditions under which individuals may increase their skills, improve their core competencies, and thus add to their personal market value.

The 'new' career message therefore no longer necessarily implies a long term relationship between employer and employee but rather a series of mutually beneficial transactions based on both organisational and individual needs. In this sense, Herriot & Pemberton (1995) have suggested that one way of reconceptualising the notion of career is to think of it as the series of renegotiations of the psychological contract.

We also know that most employers are increasingly placing the onus on individuals to manage and monitor their own career development. The emphasis is therefore on the individual to consider his/her strengths and weaknesses, skills and attributes, and to plan their vocational *and* educational development in line with changing market needs.

The dynamics of the new organisational (career) reality therefore seem to suggest that from both the organisational and individual perspectives, there are a number of assumptions which underpin shifts in emphasis: (1) career progression is no longer, necessarily, hierarchical in direction; (2) the *good* cv may no longer be one with an impressive list of job titles of increasing seniority, but rather a rich cv; one which includes a variety of work and non-work activities; (3) the rich cv may also show both vertical and lateral career moves, increasingly between a number of organisations; (4) the rich cv may provide evidence of job flexibility, demonstrating movement across and between functions; and (5) we might argue that it is no longer absolutely necessary to have entirely unbroken periods of employment, so long as career breaks can be shown to have in some way developed the individual's portfolio of life skills.

Returning to the core assumptions of classical career theory then, we might suggest a number of key shifts in emphasis which serve to identify the key components of our 'new' definitions of career. For many people, work remains a central feature of everyday life. To this extent, 'work' and the 'career' perform a fundamental function in establishing one's sense of self, social status and worth. Thus, to articulate that "we no longer offer careers" is to directly challenge an individual's self concept and self esteem. Such is the importance of the role of the career that this statement alone can generate considerable anxiety, alienation and helplessness.

In re-framing a definition of career, therefore, there is a need to recognise the psychological impress of the language and symbols used to convey career messages. There is a need for accuracy and precision. It is not the case that careers no longer exist (if indeed they ever have done in absolute, static terms). It is simply that the assumptions which have dominated both management thinking and practice over the last thirty years have changed. Both the meaning and purpose of career has changed in order to encompass notions of breadth and dynamism.

Whilst we may continue to conceive of organisations as social institutions, the new reality of the organisational career experience for many is that organisations no longer symbolise security, stability and permanence. The career for life is being replaced by developmental opportunities, and the promise of future rewards for loyalty is being replaced by the promise of short term contracts in return for performance against agreed objectives. The organisation is no longer concerned, in an altruistic or patriarchal sense, with the future development of its employees - or at least this is how it may appear to individuals in the light of current career messages.

Instead, what we mean when we talk of the *death* of the career is simply that the rules of the career game have changed !

For over forty years, writers have espoused the virtues of a matching of organisational and individual needs. However, the reality of organisational careers for many in the past few decades has been quite the contrary. Organisational career structures have primarily been designed to meet the needs of the organisation both in the present and in the future. Whilst for some, there has been an element of career choice throughout this period, for many the *tournament model* of careers seems a more appropriate metaphor [Sonnenfeld, 1984]. In Darwinian terms, career success has been about the survival of the fittest, or perhaps more accurately, the most politically astute [Lee & Piper, 1989]. Now, however, the name of the career game really *is* 'mutual benefit'.

It follows that career theory should now pay greater attention to social psychological processes of individual-organisation interaction. For practical reasons alone, this is particularly the case with high potential populations if organisations are to retain the requisite cadre of managers to meet future organisational needs and to sustain organisational culture. From a socio-cultural perspective, there is also a need to embrace the reality of change in work-family arrangements and in working patterns, the rise in the number of part time jobs [Brewster *et al* 1993], and the recently identified trend toward *downshifting* [Laabs, 1996].

Above all, however, it seems that we should not lose sight of the importance of time in our definitions of career. At one level, the career can literally be seen as a *lifetime* project [Grey, 1994]. It is not something which lasts only five, ten or twenty years, but is fundamentally a lifelong responsibility of adulthood.

Conclusions.

The preceding discussion suggests three important assumptions which might serve to underpin our 'new' definitions of career, namely:

(1) The career fundamentally *belongs* to the individual. It is not something which is owned by or necessarily should be managed by organisations. Our definitions should embrace the notion that the career performs a fundamental function in the construction and maintenance of a healthy self concept, congruent with individuals' strengths and weaknesses, deeply-held beliefs and attitudes, and future aspirations.

In this sense, the career is indeed a project of the self, or perhaps more appropriately, a vehicle for the continuous realisation of self.

(2) Whilst we may continue to see the organisation as the primary social institution in which managerial careers are developed, we should recognise that this is but one of several social domains in which individuals engage. This point has been emphasised in studies concerned with work-family conflict, the dual career couple, and the adult lifecycle. However, to focus only at this level of analysis is to over-emphasise the socio-spatial elements of the life career. We should also acknowledge that the career evolves over time; it has a fundamental, temporal quality. As such, it is not a static, inanimate 'object' rather it is necessarily a continuously constructed phenomenon. Thus, the meaning of career to individuals is constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in the light of both personal and organisational change and development.

(3) If the concept of career is to remain relevant to both organisations and individuals, there is a need to generate new definitions of career which recognise the fundamental importance of mutual benefit. The environmental and organisational circumstances of the nineties suggest that the assumptions which have underpinned career theory in the past thirty years are no longer appropriate. Gone are the days when organisations could afford to direct their employees' careers solely to meet the objectives of the organisation.

If organisations are to retain their best people, then individuals' needs, wants and aspirations should be taken into account. To this extent, careers research might focus much more closely on individuals' subjective experiences of career. It follows that in order to build meaningful definitions of career, we should begin with lay understandings. In the past twenty years in particular, career theory has been dominated by organisational concerns. Perhaps the time has come for a wholesale revision of our understanding of the subjective career as the first step in redefining or re-affirming our broader conceptions of career.

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